DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 139 416 IR 004 806

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TITLE The Helping Aspects of Training the New Information Professional.
PUB DATE Jan 77
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of American Library Schools (Washington, D.C., January 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Helping Relationship; *Information Scientists; *Library Education; *Library Schools; *Professional Training; Skills

ABSTRACT

This speech, presented in response to Ronald G. Havelock's "The Information Professional as Change Agent" at the 1977 annual conference of the Association of American Library Schools, is an overview of the helping aspects of training the new information professional. It contains a summary of current thinking, reviews the skills needed by information professionals, discusses the personal traits of library school students that both hinder and facilitate the acquisition of those skills, and suggests training methods for overcoming the negative traits. The need for a professional organization to provide a framework for the continuing education and of library school graduates is stressed. (Author/KP)

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The Helping Aspects of Training the New Information Profesional

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ABSTRACT

The Helping Aspects of Training the New Information Professional
by
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This speech was presented in response to Ronald G. Havelock's keynote address, "The Information Professional as Change Agent", at the annual conference of the Association of American Library Schools. It is a general overview of the helping aspects of training the new information professional and contains a summary of current thinking. The author reviews the skills needed by information professionals, discusses the personal traits of library school students that both hinder and facilitate the acquisition of those skills, and suggests training methods for overcoming the negative traits. Finally, she stresses the need for a professional organization to provide a framework for the continuing education and support of library school graduates.

Paper to be presented at the annual meeting of the Association of American Library Schools, Washington, D.C., January 1977

The Helping Aspects of Training the New Information Professional

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I will make every attempt to restrict my comments on information professionals to the non-cognitive aspects of their training and leave the discussion of cognitive skills to Dean Taylor. Primarily, I will be exploring the personality traits, the affective training, and the organizational environments which will assist information professionals in doing the best job possible. To a lesser extent, I will suggest some cognitive skills which are required in order for information professionals to succeed in the helping aspect of their endeavors. But since people are the key to success, both as professionals and clients, let me begin with the human element.

THE HUMAN ELEMENT

Determining the Client's Need

The activities undertaken by an information professional in the information environment that will be, and to some extent already is, re-

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quire a number of special skills. Perhaps the foremost skill is communication. The ability to assist a client in articulating needs, to explain to the client's superiors why this need should be met, to assure underlings that their concerns will not be ignored, and to report to the funders when the project is complete; all these activities require communication skills of a high order.

To tease out of the client the real information needs as opposed to those he immediately perceives will require close attention. Both verbal and paralinguistic information in addition to keen observation of the client's setting will provide ideas. Moreover, once the need is identified, the information professional must be able to translate it into a problem or set of problems that the professional and client can work together to solve. Once more the skills of communication, observation and a good measure of insight will be needed.

Resolving The Client's Problem

Once the problem is clearly understood, the information professional can begin to work out a solution with the client. Informational problems will most often require a restructuring of the information flow ansd processing for their resolution. Such restructuring activities are likely to lead to conflicts and resistance to change from within the organization. There will be clients who will have information which they do not wish to share. There will be others who will insist upon seeing information they really don't require. The information professional will need tolerance for conflict and dissention, as well as some facility for resolving conflict and minimizing resistance to change. The client's organization will need time to adapt to the new information

environment, and the information professional will need to provide reassurance, advice, refereeing, and general group facilitating.

In addition, skill in applying appropriate technology to solve a client's problem will be needed. The information professional either has to understand the technology reasonably well or has to be able to locate other people who understand it and can apply it effectively. Finally, in order to both evaluate and justify a particular solution, the information professional will need to be familiar with cost effective techniques so that the client and the client's funders can be convinced that this solution is economically reasonable.

Creating a Climate of Renewal

Once the client has a problem solved, the information professional has one other concern. Good solutions must include a provision for future adaption. The information professional who wants to stay in business and to serve the client's needs will try to create a solution setting that will continue to adapt. To do that, the information professional will need to teach the client some of the skills of an information professional. The client needs to learn how to diagnose early warning signals that the system is in trouble. Some of these may be built into a good information system, but the client will still need to be taught how to interpret them. Another way to keep the system adapting is to make periodic assessments of it, a sort of annual check-up. For this, the information professional has to help the client become a more sophisticated consumer of professional advice, including that of information professionals. Finally, the information professional will want the client to be interested in and able to evaluate new techniques which might better solve a particular

problem. That means training the client in methods to become aware of new techniques and ways to evaluate the utility of such new techniques. Information professionals will need to be rather good teachers to train clients how to work as diagnosticians, evaluators, and innovators for each client's setting. The clients won't take over the information professional's own job after a short time because the client's skill training will be limited to one setting.

Strengths of Library School Students

Since by now some of you are despairing of ever finding or training information professionals with all the skills I have enumerated, let me hasten to point out that library science students have some singular strengths which equip them for this sort of work. The first of these is that our students tend to be more literate than the average student. This means that they have a better than average chance of knowing the difference between good writing and bad. It also means that they have a better command of the language and the potential to be reasonably articulate. True, not all library students are literate and articulate, but the best are. And those who are going to be successful information professionals had better be. The most frequently identified training deficit named by planning students ten years out of MIT was lack of ability to communicate effectively in written and verbal forms. If government bureaucrats need that skill, information professionals need it more. Writing and speaking skills are going to be needed to write funding proposals and final reports, to prepare explanations of the system to staff, and to persuade administrators. Since language skills really will be valuable, this is one time to rejoice in the large number of English majors who go into library science.

The second advantage of the library student is that many of the people who decide to enter the profession (and therefore the library school) are people with a strong dedication to helping others. This is an advantage in that it means that the information professionals we are training will have a predisposition to listening to people express their needs and trying to deal with those needs rather than offering this week's special solution to all problems. Another aspect of the same personality is that many of our students are willing and frequently quite able to share some of their special information and skills with people who need to learn. This sharing becomes especially valuable in both reducing conflict and in creating adaptive information systems. While the ability to reduce conflict and teach information system assessment require a great deal more than the desire to help, the nurturing of such ability rests solidly on strength of desire to help.

The third advantage of the library profession is that many people see the librarian as a non-judgmental person. That means that some clients will come to someone with the training and title of "librarian" expecting that this person will have no special position to uphold other than what is in the clients' best interests. Obviously, this sort of expectation will do a great deal for mutual trust, respect, and ultimately for facile communication. So I would suggest that we should not lightly reject either the image or the traditions of the library profession when we prepare to train our new information professionals.

Weaknesses of Library School Students

Unfortunately, the library students have other traits that often make it difficult for them to succeed in the new information profession. One

area of training that is often lacking is skills in numerate analysis and evaluation of research. Without this training, it is extremely hard for the information professional to assess new technology or to teach a client to do so. It also makes the economic justification and support of projects more difficult. This particular deficiency can be partly remedied with instruction.

A second problem for many people who choose library science for study is that they are more given to supportive helping than to adversarial or conflict situations. Compare library and law students in your mind and you will see what I mean. While there is some advantage to having people who don't thrive on conflictual situations, there is one danger. If the information professional is not carefully trained to deal with conflict, it is possible that the disagreements of the client's staff will be smoothed over too quickly rather than truly resolved. Students should be carefully trained in the difference between resolving a conflict and glossing over it. This training can sometimes be accomplished by careful field placement.

A third trait which presents some difficulty is that library students are not noted as risk takers. Going into a less than satisfactory situation and trying out a new solution to its problems is a risky acitivity. There is no way around it: innovation does bring risks. Some experiments fail. Even those information professionals who work in traditional settings are going to encounter some risks. Those who select free lance settings are going to encounter very considerable risk. Therefore, some method to teach our new information professionals how to deal with risks, and maybe even to enjoy the process, is desirable.

Training to Overcome Student Deficits

It would be of questionable use to consider the liabilities of library students if there were no way around their weaknesses. Fortunately, there are a number of training experiences that can help overcome liabilities. Communication skills are probably best dealt with through human relations exercises or T-group training. The type of experiences I consider most useful are short exercises in communication with specific objectives, group feedback, and discussion after each exercise. Focus should always remain on the process of effective communication. Let us be clear why we are training students in interpersonal communication skills. The purpose is NOT to make students happier, self-actualizing, assertive, or fulfilled. If the training also results in any of the above, it will be very pleasant. Its primary purpose, however, is to make information professionals into better problem analysts and problem solvers. If this objective is clearly understood and accepted by those conducting the training, the resulting product is likely to be far more acceptable to administrators and to students.

A second type of training needed by students is in the process of group decision making and group dynamics. Here I do not mean the theory of group dynamics, but rather, practical experience in group decision making, conflict resolution, and group process. One excellent way to allow students to gain experience in group process first hand is to send them out for field experiences in the new information profession. This has two drawbacks, however. It takes a great deal of close supervision and the potential for mistakes and disasters is very great. Another solution to group process training is simulation games. Here, students themselves take on roles and play out various attempts to create certain set results. The student can be encouraged to experiment with various

approaches because, if things go sour, it was only a game and classmates will forget it by the next week. Simulations, with or without computers, are probably best used for group dynamics training in the early stages followed by field experiences which will allow students to test out newly acquired skills. If field experiences are not available, a good deal of training can result from assigning students to work on team projects while in school. Working on teams will also provide practical experiences in group dynamics and conflict resolution.

A third problem area is in risk taking. No one simple prescription will suffice to make student into willing risk takers. A whole attitude is needed that allows and supports risky behavior. Just as many library schools teach organization of materials not just in cataloging classes but in most library school classes, so also training in risk taking will need to pervade the whole curriculum. It helps if students can experience success in situations of successively greater riskiness until they can cope with unstructured settings. The successes will impart confidence. So will a good foundation in research methods and assessment of research design. This will help because it has the potential to teach people an experimental attitude toward problem solving. Students who know that many attempts were made to solve a problem before a successful solution was found are more likely to tolerate some failures in their own problem solving attempts.

One risk taking training course might run like this. Students would begin with class exercises in risk taking. After one or two weeks they would move to a simulation of innovation which would use the class itself as both the client and information professional. The next step

would be to send groups of students with a somewhat more experienced group leader out into the campus or community to do short (less than one month) projects in information facilitating. Clients would be recruited who are willing to accept information professionals in training in return for free information services. Clients would be expected to help students resolve conflicts, understand problems and solutions, and prepare documentation. After one such project, students should be regrouped and sent to a longer (about two months) project. Once the students complete two such projects, they are ready to be promoted to group leader and sent out with a less experienced set of students. The group leader would have full responsibility for group performance to the client and instructor. The final stage of training would be to place students as paid information professionals on projects of about two to three months durations. In this final stage the instructor would serve only as an advisory consultant to the student.

Current Teaching Practices to Continue

Some of the present practices in library school teaching are also valuable in training the new information professional. While library students are often literate and articulate, they need every opportunity to improve. Class presentations and report writing are very valuable training devices used in many classes right now. Better use of visual display and videotape would also be desirable. Media courses ought not to be the total province of the school librarians, these courses are equally valuable to train new information professionals in how to make better presentations with media enrichment.

We have a good base in library schools. Our students have many skills in helping people, in literate and articulate use of the language, and in non-judgmental assistance. With proper experience and guidance they can also acquire the skills they will need in analytics, conflict resolution, risk taking, and group dynamics. Once the schools of library science have a curriculum that will turn out information professionals who can work as effective change agents, I believe there is one further obligation to these people on the part of the schools that train them. Even with the best of training, new information professionals will still need ongoing support and a sense of group solidarity that a professional organization provides. I know there are numerous candidates for the honor and I will not discuss which one could do the job best. Instead, I will consider the activities that an association would undertake on behalf of information professionals. I speak to this group on the subject because the leadership of the association is going to have to come from among you.

Services an Association Gives to Information Professionals

To the information professionals an association could offer two major services. The first is a supportive function. For people who will be working on projects that are inherently conflictual and risky, some supportive peer group is desirable if only to provide reassurance and encouragement (and to lick wounds after a battering). The second function should be a natural outgrowth of such solidarity; a willingness to share experiences. Not only will new information professionals need to teach each other, but all of them are going to need great amounts of continuing education to stay on top of the technology they work with. An association can provide a framework for both experience exchange and periodic updating.

Services an Association Does for Information Professionals

There are three other services an association could perform for information professionals. It would serve as a lobby and image booster to the public and government in much the way the ALA does for librarians. It could also serve as a quality control arbitrator of who is and who is not a good information professional. Without such a function all sorts of incompetent people may decide to call themselves information professionals. And with it, yes, we are very likely to be accused of trying to become another AMA. Finally, the association can serve as a clearinghouse for recruiting new information professionals. Once a potential employer decides to hire an information professional, it would be helpful if there were somewhere to go to get one. Also, recruiting will aid the information professionals in accepting more risks; it is easier to tolerate a chancy job if another can be found reasonably soon should the present situation go awry. A ready source of many short jobs will also do a good deal to reduce the difficulties that free lance workers experience when trying to enter the information profession. So what we want is the best aspects of a professional society, a guild, and a union hall. A tall order, but the importance of such a supportive organization is so important to the ultimate success of the new information profession, that I think the development of the association deserves as much consideration and work as the development of the library school curriculum for the new information professional.

In conclusion, I see in many library students the very attributes which the new information professional needs: a high degree of literacy, a dedication to service, and an image of objectivity. Some of the traits which may make the transition to the new profession difficult such as

avoidance of risk and conflict can be remedied by group process training. A supportive professional organization can be of inestimable value to the new information professional, but ultimately the fostering of the organization will rest with library school educators. I hope that we have given you a start, but it is up to you people here to build the ediface.